Robin Jenkins' Fiction

by Isobel Murray

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Robin Jenkins was thirty-eight when he published his first novel, *So Gaily Sings The Lark* in 1950. He was teaching in a rough area of Glasgow's east end, the third major setting for his own life and his subsequent novels. The first setting was Flemington, near Cambuslang in Lanarkshire, where he was born in 1912 and brought up in a working-class environment by a widowed mother in straitened circumstances. Flemington was a small mining village where 'pit bings rose like volcanoes out of fields and woods,' and poverty and deprivation were commonplace. Jenkins himself is very clear that the early years are crucially formative for any novelist:

A novelist whose purpose is the portrayal of character writes with confidence and insight about the people he knows instinctively, those he was born and brought up amongst. As a child he (or she) stores up, unconsciously, a reservoir of knowledge of human nature, upon which he draws for the rest of his life. When he grows up he adds to that knowledge, from observation and thought, but whatever inspirations he may have will come from his store of childhood memories.

Many of his novels, including *Happy for the Child* and the football saga *The Thistle and the Grail*, are set in Lanarkshire, in the depressed central belt of Scotland, and some, including *A Very Scotch Affair* and *Guests of War*, are set in part in a very squalid Glasgow.

But one other milieu was to have a great and determining effect on his fiction. Between the Lanarkshire of the Depression and the city slum school of the late Forties came the war. Jenkins' detestation of cruelty and inhumanity had early led to his becoming a convinced pacifist, and he was eventually accepted as a conscientious objector on condition that he went into forestry or agriculture. From 1940 to 1946 the future novelist worked for the Forestry Commission in Argyll, an outstandingly beautiful part of Scotland. Six years in the forests of Argyll made an indelible impact on the man and his work, as is evident to any reader of *The Cone-Gatherers*, for example: it is no accident that he left Glasgow in 1955 for a post at Dunoon Grammar School. Although his books were beginning to attract attention and his professional prospects in Glasgow looked good, ‘I decided to everybody’s surprise that I would come down to Dunoon and teach in a humble assistant’s job because I wanted a place that had a beautiful background where I could get on with my writing.’ Although he was to spend a lot of time abroad, in Afghanistan, Borneo and Spain, he put down roots in Argyll, and his home is still on a hillside outside Dunoon, with breathtaking views of the Firth of Clyde. And many novels reflect the forestry setting and experience in particular, or a passionate appreciation of natural beauty in general.

The vivid contrasts of industrial poverty and deprivation with radiant pastoral beauty so common and so striking in the novels are thus based on profound personal experience. They seem to have become as central to Jenkins’ imagination as similar contrasts did for Edwin Muir; the paradisal Orcadian island of Wyre in his early childhood, the hellish slums of Glasgow in his tormented adolescence, becoming powerful symbols of innocence and perversion. In Jenkins’ case, except in the books based on his time abroad, these contrasted pictures, first underlined in *Guests of War* and *The Changeling*, remain crucial in the later novels too: a boy traumatised by witnessing his father’s murder of his mother may be healed by love on a beautiful Hebridean island in *A love Of Innocence*: the eponymous Fergus Lamont dreams of returning to the slums of his native Gantock mysteriously able to redeem the people because of the purifying effect of his ten years with Kirstie on an impoverished island.

Indignation at the maiming effects of poverty was clearly a large part of the impetus which led Jenkins to write. But this does not emerge in a political approach to writing; rather an individually moral one. In his personal quest for truth, justice, goodness and love, he has tended to be independent and even idiosyncratic on moral, political and religious issues. Often it is as if the author tacitly and unobtrusively provides a court in which, prosecutor and defender, he balances rigorous moral investigation, and sometimes condemnation, with a persuasive account of mitigating circumstances. Passionate atheist though he is, in his novels Jenkins more than most novelists usurps the traditional functions of God. The irony which is a major weapon here can easily be missed or misunderstood.

As a teenager he sampled many churches before resolutely embracing atheism. He empathised with children unfairly punished at school, and has continued to oppose cruelty and brutal force. Personal conviction more than any party line led to his own stand as a conscientious objector. Before that, for a time in the late Thirties, although clearly he was never one of nature's joiners, Jenkins belonged to the Independent Labour Party, and became a branch secretary. But he described it in 1985 with a rueful chuckle:

'I was in the ILP, for instance, before the War, and the ILP must be the purest political party that ever existed. So pure that they just were blown away in the end by this wicked world! We thought that we could show men a better way! But we found not.'
He usefully summed up his individual belief and novelistic practice:

'I don't see myself as a political person. I see myself as a moralist. I judge all political issues from a moral point of view. And my books, I'm pretty sure, are sometimes over-steeped in morality.'
And he said to me in September 1988, at the launch of the new edition of *Guests of War* at Glasgow City Chambers: 'It's a bit of a martyrdom seeing life in moral terms all the time.'

It is tempting but dangerous to make generalisations about Jenkins' early treatments of urban slum and country life, of the poverty and deprivation that maim and deform people, and the increasing importance in the novels of some quasi-Wordsworthian experience of love or nature or both, that heals and reforms. Another temptation to generalise comes when we see how often Jenkins seems to suggest that it is almost as though happiness, innocence and goodness all depend on a less than 20/20 adult vision of the world. We think of Calum in *The Cone-Gatherers*, Sammy McShelvie in *Guests of War*, Fergus Lamont's partner Kirstie. But I would stress that what is most interesting is not generalisations, but always the specific, particular novel, how contrasts are introduced and used, the subtleties of character, the nuances of particular points of view.

Happy for the Child is a claustrophobic novel, centring on two boys in very different kinds of poverty, narrow, grim, and realistic in a heightened way. *The Cone-Gatherers* is a tragic fable of human evil. *Guests of War* is a comic *tour de force* about the evacuation of Glasgow slum children to a wealthy Borders town, as well as a moving study of its central character, Bell McShelvie, and *The Changeling* begins somewhere near farce and ends in tragedy.

Happy for the Child is set entirely in Jenkins' native Lanarkshire, unrelieved by any contrastingly beautiful scenes. For John Stirling, the only real escape from the mean circumstances of his life is the traditional Scots escape via education. John is exceptionally intelligent — a model of the traditional 'lad o' pairts' — and he has every chance of succeeding at the Academy where his brains have won him a place, unless he is shamed out of the school, as he feels sure he will be, if his classmates ever learn that his mother earns her pitifully small living by washing and scrubbing. John consciously indulges his sensitivity on this issue, repeatedly making his mother suffer for his shame, and Jenkins makes it clear that John understands the pain he inflicts, and deserves condemnation for it. Jenkins' children are quite as capable of wrongdoing as his adults, and he does not spare them.

The other unhappy child, the demonic counterpart to John Stirling, is Sam Gourlay. We meet him first through John's gloating thoughts: one of the less endearing aspects of most of the boys in the book is the way they find comfort — even at times delight — in considering the plight of those in worse circumstances than their own. So John comforts himself by comparing his lot with Sam's. The description of the Gourlay family, being the perception of an unsympathetic and somewhat hostile small boy, has added bite:

Gourlay was a dunce thrashed every day by his teachers for stupidity or insolence ... Gourlay's mother was a huge cruel desperate woman who hammered and starved him. His father, small, sleekit, idle, wore the same dirty green muffler always and, jouking down as if it was a joke, picked fagends off the street. His sister Jeanie, a specky white-faced pimply girl with teeth missing and with great red blotchy hands like docken leaves, worked in the laundry. Gourlay had already been at court several times, for stealing, for doing damage, for setting squibs off in the street; it was said he was on his last chance, next time he would be sent to a reformatory.

We meet Gourlay in person a few pages later, engaged in a characteristic activity with a companion. They are busily impaling earwigs on a fence rail with pins.

It is Sam's father who articulates the horrors of their life:

'Will I tell you, elder, why I don't believe in hell? Because I'm convinced it's beyond the ingenuity of even the Almighty to think up worse punishments than these. We breathe and we're in hell. Listen.'

They heard Jeanie's sobbing, a bus on the street outside, and in the house thuds and screams from the thudder.

And the unemployed Gourlay's experience of emptiness, unhappiness and boredom is memorably conveyed:

He turned and looked at the clock. The thought of the long cold eternity till bedtime distracted him. Little diversions such as putting on his jacket, winding his green muffler closer round his neck, blowing his nose into the sink, investigating in the coal bunker, keeking out of the window at winter, rifting in the middle of the floor, turning up the gas and having to lower it again because of its snake-like hiss and his wife's she-bear's snarl, pokering the last few embers, searching four times through all his pockets: all these passed a terrifyingly short time. When he glanced at the clock again it was just half-past seven.

He sat down by the fire, and himself underwent a slow extinguishing.

One reason for the peculiar vividness and success of *Happy for the Child* is its closeness to the author's own experience. The author agrees that the situation of John Stirling is close to his own; a poor home, a hard-working mother, a bursary to a feepaying school (Hamilton Academy), a brilliant scholar:

'Yes, I think to some extent *Happy for the Child* is autobiographical ... They refused to believe that it was as difficult for me as it was for John Stirling. I say this, it was every bit as difficult for me.'

As I read it *The Cone-Gatherers* is Jenkins' major analysis of man's evil, and his propensity for war. We do not escape war by retreating into the wood. The gamekeeper Duror has his own war to fight, in his marriage situation, and he also comes to represent real evil. We are early told of his ungovernable disgust at deformity, something that has been with him since childhood: now the world outside corresponds to his secret rage:

He had read that the Germans were putting idiots and cripples to death in gas chambers. Outwardly, as everybody expected, he condemned such barbarity; inwardly, thinking of idiocy and crippledness not as abstractions but as embodied in the crouchbacked cone-gatherer, he had profoundly approved.

Although there are few characters in the novel, they represent the whole scale of human possibility, from Duror's evil to Calum's mentally handicapped pure goodness. In between we have Lady Runcie-Campbell, trying to reconcile her beliefs in class privilege and

Christianity, love and war, the (offstage) conscientious objectors, Neil and Tulloch. Neil's experience of life in some ways resembles Duror's, and he too has some bitterness. Duror, who almost instinctively hates deformity, has to watch the woman he loves becoming monstrous, fat and silly, and to suffer sexual repression. Neil never flinches from carrying his brother as burden: he truly is his brother's keeper, and he has turned his back on marriage and his longing to be a sailor, to care for Calum. He is seen at times as bitter, angry and even vengeful, but the *human* extent of his rage underlines by contrast the near diabolic rage of Duror.

Lady Runcie-Campbell's differences of opinion with her son Roderick are obvious places where her personal conflict between her idea of aristocracy and her father's ideal of Christianity is at its most intense. His innocent, uncontaminated, instinctive morality measures her compromise. Her differences with the adult Tulloch are also enlightening. He understands the situation of the cone-gatherers, and tries to protect them. He tests Lady Runcie-Campbell with the possibility of replacing the cone-gatherers with conscientious objectors, one he knows will not please her. He understands Duror's sorry filth about Calum, when she only becomes overwrought, and he sees three possible explanations for Duror's condition; the whole man's disgust at the deformed man, the intrusion into his wood, or inexplicable dislike. As the reader has already learned from the narrator, all three are true readings.

I suggested earlier that although Jenkins is a sharp judge of humanity, he is also a powerful presenter of mitigating circumstances: but in the case of Duror, he has to present a developing picture of a nightmarish insanity of evil that is in the end unquestioned. Early on we feel quite sympathetic. Duror's life situation, his grotesque wife's illness, his mother-in law's malice, are all rendered convincingly. Even his childhood hatred of deformity is described as an affliction, not something that is his fault. But by careful manipulation Jenkins changes this, gradually distancing us from the keeper, and full awareness of his state of mind. We are unprepared, and as surprised as the beaters when Duror is heard uttering his wife's name in 'a shout of anguish,' and is seen staggering about. Then we are allowed a brief glimpse of his horrible dream of birds pecking Peggy to death before we are shut out again from his thoughts.

Next we have the dramatic climax of the deer hunt with blood everywhere, Calum screaming, the deer in its death agony, and Duror's 'berserk joy' as he savagely cuts the deer's throat. We cannot identify with this. Then we share his discovery that he hates Calum so profoundly because he has become the personification of his own deformed life. At last we get a gloss on Duror's experience of the deer-killing: 'in the wood his wife had changed for an instant into a roe-deer and he had cut her throat and tried to appease his agony in her blood.' He sees himself as a tiger. After that he virtually disappears from the story, and we have no more insights into his mind, only seeing him through the eyes of others. Only when Roderick sees him standing menacingly by the cone-gatherers' but does he enter the story again, and then only through the boy's eyes. Later he appears suddenly to spew filthy accusations about Calum to Lady Runcie-Campbell. We never recognise him again. He has become a demonic, unrecognisable figure, embodying extreme evil and destructiveness.

Even his name changes its significance. Duror has been associated with endurance, especially by the doctor, who understands something of his trials, and proposes a toast to endurance. But his name becomes increasingly associated with ordure. The man who cared so much about trees and who saw himself as a tree is now associated with a dead and rotten tree, and with ordure: 'A few yards off stood a dead Chilean pine, with the ground beneath littered with its fragments like ordure.' Graham 'caught sight of the gamekeeper under the dead Chilean pine,' and when he walked off with his gun in the direction of the cone-gatherers, 'it was as if the rotting tree itself had moved.' Lady Runcie-Campbell also sees:

> ...the sinister transformation in Duror, itself an episode from a macabre fairy tale, suddenly in the wood the straight stalwart

immaculate ash tree turning to squat warty bush swarming with worms.
Even radiant natural beauty has become corruption and rot.

Guests of War and *The Changeling* both exploit the contrast of the foulest slums with some of Scotland's loveliest scenery and more prosperous citizens, and at least one character in each novel believes strongly in the healing and sustaining power of these landscapes. The situation of *Guests of War* offers a chance to explore the question of the healing power of beauty on the largest scale, as it records and reflects one of the biggest mass movements of civilians in our history. The novelist was both witness and participant in the evacuation of Glasgow children in August 1939: 'I *did* go with Strathclyde Primary School kids to Moffatt, and quite a lot of the things that happen in the book did happen in real life. Pretty much as I describe it too. It was hilarious!' This largescale migration of children, mothers and teachers to the elegant Borders town, Langrigg in the novel, is not only an excuse for wonderful comic observation, it is also a perfect context in which to measure the heroine Bell McShelvie, who has lived in a Glasgow slum for the last twenty of her fifty years, but has never forgotten or ceased to yearn for the country, where she lived until she was six.

Bell distrusts her own motives, puts the worst possible construction on her own behaviour, and is her own most stringent critic. Jenkins the pacifist has an ironic habit, in this novel as elsewhere, of using images of war for situations we normally associate with peacetime. So at the start of the novel Bell accepts her neighbour's reproach that her desire to accompany the children to Langrigg is running away, and she strengthens it in her own mind:

Here indeed was her battlefield: the enemy she had to fight was despair at the ugliness shutting her in, at the inevitable coarseness and pitiable savagery of many of the people shut in with her, and above all at her inability to keep her own family healthy, sweet, and intact. She was weary of fighting. Even soldiers in war were given relief ... The battle was at its height, ... and she had made up her mind to desert.

I want to call this book a comedy, for all that it incorporates a desperately sad, potentially tragic situation. At the start, we learn that Bell's son Sammy, generally thought to be 'soft in the head', is what has made up for the loss of the country in her life: 'most admitted the softness, and greenness, were in his heart. As a substitute for those meadows and hills, Sammy all his twelve years had sufficed.' Repeated hints throughout the novel suggest that Sammy will die young, will be the price Bell has to pay for her 'desertion'. After his death, 'the prospect back in Wallace Street seemed to her unbroken darkness': in the past, 'Sammy sometimes had been able to scrape away some of that soot, and let in a little light'. Nonetheless I would call the book a comedy for two reasons: the evacuation generally is treated as a hilarious comic epic, and the class conflicts in Langrigg finally belong to a rich, affirmative picture of life: and Bell meets her personal 'tragedy' with determination and affirmation.

The Changeling is very different. One well-meaning, bumbling school teacher conceives the idea that he can reverse the shocking impact of the slums for one bright pupil, by taking him on the family holiday down the Firth of Clyde. Charlie Forbes himself does come to understand the impracticality and failure of his project, and he and his wife have to learn the hard way 'that love had failed amongst them, and for the rest of their lives they, and their children, must live in the shadow of that failure.' But the protagonist of the tragedy here is not the absurd would-be Samaritan teacher, nor a strong, middle-aged woman like Bell McShelvie; it is a thirteen-year-old boy, Tom Curdie. For Tom, the tragic process is clear: on the holiday it is less even the radiant beauty of the landscape than the kindness and companionship of the Forbes family that gradually overcomes his independence. Increasingly he learns that he cannot return 'home'. By the end of the novel, overcome by the appearance of his unlovely family at the Forbes's holiday home, he simply has nowhere to go.

The ending to *Guests of War* is a qualified victory for Bell. She has gone out at last, to climb Brack Fell, the hill she has dreamed of climbing for so long. The last chapter quietly follows her thoughts on this climb, as she decides at great personal cost to return home, ‘to create as much light there as she could, not only for herself and her family, but for her neighbours.’ In the end she realises that she cannot reach the summit before nightfall, and relinquishes her dream, to return to Gowburgh: she descends willingly and with resolution to the Gowburgh women below.

As she plodded along the road her feet stung and her whole body ached: but she was smiling, with the tears running down her cheeks. The horrific ending of *The Changeling* is also on a hillside. Young Gillian Forbes, once Tom’s most wary antagonist, has come to understand and love him, and she takes him up on the hill to escape both his family and the police. Gillian plans to hide him in a shepherd’s hut, but we are warned, ‘for him it could only be another place in which to try and solve what could never be solved’. Every line of this brief chapter is chilling. The two children sit listening, and ‘she could scarcely hear him breathe ... He might have been dead.’ Gillian feels ‘pity and love’ for him, and then terror, the classic Aristotelian combination. At last she goes out to listen for her father, and comes back to find Tom hanging with a noose round his neck, not quite dead. The stark ending describes briefly but unforgettably how she tries to save him, but her strength fails. In the end, like and so unlike Bell, she has to go down alone: ‘Weeping, and falling often, she made her way at a desperate pace down the hill.’ If *Guests of War* represents Jenkins at his most optimistic about the endurance and strengths of exceptional human beings, *The Changeling* offers dire news of the failure of love among some of the best intentioned, and the potential danger of love to the most deprived.

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